

VZCZCXRO8023  
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHGP #0126/01 0420540  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 110540Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6341  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2195

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000126

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA  
NEW DELHI FOR J. EHRENDREICH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/11/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION FORUM SHOWCASES DISUNITY, LACK OF IDEAS

REF: 08 SINGAPORE 1143

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel Shields for Reason 1.4(d)

Summary and Comment  
-----

11. (U) Summary. A public forum on the future of opposition politics in Singapore drew an audience of about 100 on February 7. Panelists representing civil society and two opposition parties aired grievances against the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore's electoral system, and other members of Singapore's fractured opposition. The moderator called for concrete suggestions for action, but the panelists offered only general proposals for more cooperation among opposition forces. Speakers emphasized the opposition's dependence on the Internet given that the mainstream media is effectively closed to them, and several expressed hope that Singapore will follow a Malaysian model of uniting activist bloggers with opposition politicians. Ex-PAP member Tan Kin Lian, who last year made headlines by organizing protests about ordinary Singaporeans' financial losses on Lehman Brothers "minibonds" (see reftel) and has shown interest in potentially running for elective office, spoke at the forum but did not align himself with any opposition party. End summary.

12. (SBU) Comment. The forum failed to deliver a substantive discussion of the political opposition's future. The absence of three of the five main opposition parties reflected ongoing tensions among the country's marginalized opposition and undermined the forum's credibility. After the proceedings opened on an amateurish musical note, the panelists delivered standard opposition anti-PAP rhetoric, interspersed with a handful of platitudinous proposals. The vitriol directed openly at opposition colleagues, and especially at the parties represented (albeit insignificantly) in Parliament, did nothing to chart a way forward. Although the forum garnered respectable attendance by Singapore standards, it illustrated the opposition's paucity of ideas and inability to set aside personalities and historical grievances to present a united front and build public support. End comment.

100 Singaporeans Attend Opposition Public Forum  
-----

13. (U) The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) sponsored a public forum February 7 entitled "Opposition: Where To?" Poloff observed approximately 100 Singaporeans in attendance. Only one of Singapore's four other principal opposition parties sent an official representative. The two opposition parties represented in Parliament - the Workers Party and the Singapore Democratic Alliance, each of which has a single elected MP - either declined the SDP's invitation or withdrew after initially accepting. The remaining panelists were well-known civil society figures and an official from another

opposition party who said he was attending only in his personal capacity.

#### After "Amazing Grace," Opposition Grinds Its Favorite Axes

---

¶4. (SBU) The moderator, Chee Siok Chin of the SDP, opened the event by calling on the panelists and audience to sing two verses of "Amazing Grace" in honor of late opposition leader J.B. Jeyaretnam. The audience response was tepid. Ms. Chee then invited the panelists to talk about "where the opposition is going" in Singapore, asking them to focus not on identifying problems but on making concrete suggestions for action. Ignoring this request, the panelists devoted most of their time to rehearsing long-standing complaints against the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and Singapore's electoral system. One participant said the real job of the opposition is "to make life difficult for the ruling party." Their few positive suggestions were rudimentary, such as drawing up a common agenda or manifesto, or starting a common opposition website.

#### Can Singaporeans "Do a Malaysia" Using the Internet?

---

¶5. (U) Most speakers agreed that the opposition can make no progress without an Internet strategy because the PAP dominates Singapore's mainstream media. Tan Kin Lian said his experience shows that the Internet can generate word-of-mouth publicity that reaches beyond the young or affluent; otherwise his minibond rallies, which attracted hundreds of mainly older and less well-off Singaporeans,

SINGAPORE 00000126 002 OF 002

would not have been as successful as they were. Some speakers invoked Malaysian politics, wondering if Singapore can "do a Malaysia" by virtue of politically engaged bloggers and opposition parties combining forces to effect change. SDP leader Chee Soon Juan cautioned, however, that without meaningful freedom of assembly outside cyberspace, even a politically active civil society on the Internet has only a limited ability to mobilize ordinary Singaporeans.

#### Panelists Turn Their Fire on Fellow Oppositionists

---

¶6. (U) Though they focused their criticism on the PAP, the speakers did not spare their opposition colleagues. Among other barbs, panelists said that "some opposition MPs remain silent when asked pertinent questions in Parliament"; that the opposition parties must "get their act together" as they seem to be "collections of people who can get along together" but are not bound by a common vision; and that long-serving opposition MPs have "betrayed" the voters who sent them there. An audience member asked Sin Kek Tong, chairman of the Singapore People's Party (SPP) who attended the forum in his personal capacity, whether the SPP would support a common opposition manifesto. Sin answered by criticizing his own party's secretary-general (and its sole MP): "With leaders like Chiam See Tong, it's not likely."

#### Tan Kin Lian Keeps His Political Plans to Himself

---

¶7. (C) Tan Kin Lian's participation in the forum was of particular interest because he is an ex-PAP member and the retired CEO of NTUC Income (a major GOS-linked insurer) who has expressed interest in potentially running for public office outside the PAP fold. Contacts in the National Solidarity Party earlier told Poloff that several opposition parties, including the NSP, were courting Tan, but that he has so far declined to join any of them. Tan's February 7 speech emphasized the need for the "alternative parties" - his preferred nomenclature - to promote positive ideas and avoid attacking others. He made no reference to any particular opposition party. Poloff observed him sleeping

during the speeches of some other panel members, and Tan departed promptly at 5:00 p.m. - the forum's scheduled ending time - when the audience question-and-answer session was just beginning.

Visit Embassy Singapore's Classified website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eap/singapore/index.cfm>  
SHIELDS